



HATTRICK HERO: Barcelona striker Thierry Henry scores his second goal in their 4-0 rout of Valencia during their Primera Liga encounter at Nou Camp on Saturday.

## Barca destroy Valencia

AFP, Madrid



Thierry Henry grabbed a hat-trick as Barcelona romped to a 4-0 demolition of title rivals Valencia at Camp Nou on Saturday to extend their lead at the top of the Spanish first division to six points.

French star Henry scored in the 19th, 27th and 79th minutes with Dani Alves also on the mark, as Barca stretched their advantage after second-placed Villarreal drew 3-3 against Getafe.

Barca are now unbeaten in their last 20 games in all competitions - 13 in the league - and Real Madrid, nine points adrift of their rivals, need to win their game in hand against Sevilla on Sunday with 'El Clasico' at Barca next Saturday.

"We saw the result of the Villarreal-Getafe game so we were desperate to win this match," said Henry.

"We have Shakhtar Donetsk (in the Champions League on Tuesday) and then we can focus on 'El Clasico'. It is always a great game and we are all excited about it."

With Samuel Eto'o suspended, Henry was given a more central striking role and he responded with a treble to take his season's tally to seven.

With 19 minutes gone Henry raced onto a terrific backspin pass from Yaya Toure and finished with a deft lob reminiscent of his peak years at Arsenal.

Eight minutes later Henry finished off a brilliant move started by a raking pass from Alves, side-footing in after Alexander Hleb cut the ball back.

Valencia trudged off at half-time knowing it could have been worse with Xavi hitting the post for Barca in the second minute.

It was more of the same in the second half with Xavi sliding in Alves to smash in a third goal two minutes after the break.

Barca were leading Valencia, unbeaten on their travels before this match, a merry dance and Henry had a tap-in for his hat-trick with Bojan Krkic putting the ball on a plate.

Valencia are now eight points behind Barca who are threatening to run away with the title.

Villarreal are their nearest rivals and showed the spirit of champions coming from three goals down to draw 3-3 with Getafe at El Madrigal stadium.

Getafe scored three times in the first half and looked set for another giant-killing act after defeating Real Madrid 3-1 last weekend.

However, Villarreal gave their home fans a scintillating performance after the interval with Robert Pires pulling a goal back before Sebastian Eguren and Giuseppe Rossi struck in the final seven minutes.

Villarreal will certainly settle for the draw after being 3-0 down but coach

Manuel Pellegrini will be concerned that his team have failed to win any of their last four home matches.

"Maybe a point could be seen as positive after trailing 3-0 but it is not enough for me," said Pellegrini. "In the second half, we took three of our countless chances and in the end we could have won it."

Getafe, coached by Victor Munoz, who was in charge of Villarreal from 2000 to 2003, are now unbeaten against last season's top three.

"The referee helped them to get the draw," he said.

It was a goal-packed Saturday with Atletico Madrid climbing to fifth with a thumping 5-2 win at Sporting Gijon.

Sporting took a fourth minute lead through Mate Bilic but Argentine Sergio "Kun" Agüero scored a first half brace to turn the game in Atletico's favour.

Diego Forlan scored twice and Maxi Rodriguez was also in target in the second half as Atletico ran riot.

Atletico had struggled against the so-called lesser teams of late so coach Javier Aguirre was happy to get three points.

"I am happy that we won because we could not afford to miss another opportunity after the games against Numancia (1-1) and Osasuna (0-0)," he said.

Atletico moved above Sevilla - who are in action against Real Madrid on Sunday - on goal difference.

## Diarra to go under knife

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid's Mali international Mahamadou Diarra will undergo arthroscopic surgery on his right knee on Monday, the club said Saturday.

"After undergoing several tests following a training session, during which Mahamadou Diarra felt severe pain in his right knee, it has been decided that he will have arthroscopic surgery next Monday," the club said in a statement posted on its internet site.

The operation will be carried out at Madrid's La Moraleja Hospital, it added.

Spanish sports daily Marca said Wednesday that the 27-year-old defensive midfielder could be sidelined for between two to six months.

The reigning Spanish champions have struggled this season, in part due to a steady stream of injuries suffered by key players, and currently lie in fourth place, six points behind leaders Barcelona.

The club on Thursday presented its new signing, Dutch international striker Klaas-Jan Huntelaar, seen as a replacement for Ruud van Nistelrooy, who is out until the end of the season after a knee operation.

## Marseille clash worry Atletico

AFP, Madrid

Atletico Madrid president Enrique Cerezo says he is "worried" about his side's Champions League match at Marseille on Tuesday after a Spanish court sentenced a supporter of the French side to jail for attacking a police officer.

"I am not scared, what I am is worried. We are going to be protected at all times by the police. We are going to play a match and not to be put on trial," he was quoted as saying on Saturday by the Internet site of sports daily Marca.

Atletico has always stayed on the sidelines of this. We have nothing to do with this matter. At no time did we ever ask for any punishment. It's a Spanish justice matter. I am not a judge nor a policeman."

A Madrid court on Friday sentenced Marseille supporter Santos Mirasierra to three-and-a-half years in prison for acts of violence before the start of the French side's Champions League match at Atletico's Vicente Calderon stadium on October 1.

Before the court issued its sentence, Atletico said it had received threatening e-mail from Marseille fans warning of retaliation during the two sides' return tie at the French club's Velodrome stadium on Tuesday if Mirasierra was convicted.

Cerezo has asked supporters not to travel to Marseille for the match, noting that the club has already qualified for the next round.

Atletico players and officials will arrive in Marseille on the day of the match and leave immediately afterwards in a bid to avoid incidents amid tensions between their supporters.

During his trial, Mirasierra denied throwing a chair during fighting between Marseille fans and Spanish police before the match, but admitted pushing a policeman, saying he was defending a female Marseille supporter.

## Benitez stays confident

AFP, Blackburn



Rafael Benitez insists his Liverpool team can stay at the summit of the Premier League despite their stuttering form and bring the English title back to Anfield for the first time since 1990.

Liverpool's 3-1 victory away to Blackburn Rovers was harsh on the hosts, and even though they remain top of the table, the Reds look far from convincing.

Having been held to goalless draws against Fulham and West Ham in their previous two outings, Liverpool had to wait until the 69th minute to break the deadlock through Xabi Alonso at Ewood Park.

Even though they have hardly hit top form, Benitez believes Liverpool, currently a point ahead of second-placed Chelsea, have what it takes to stay one step ahead of the chasing pack.

"We have to play with confidence because we're in a very good position," said Liverpool's manager.

"If we can move and pass the ball like we did against Blackburn and be more clinical in front of goal, that will be really important through Christmas time."

"We saw again that we can manage the pressure and play

well if it's necessary. Sometimes in some games when a team is working so hard you know that sometimes you will have problems but we had the control and created some chances and were more clinical."

With Fernando Torres likely to be out for another three weeks, Benitez, who claimed he is not looking to recruit a striker in January, left Robbie Keane on the bench and used Dirk Kuyt as a lone forward.

Even when Ryan Babel went off with a knock, Benitez decided to bring on Nabil El Zhar rather than Keane, a 20.3 million pounds signing from Tottenham in July.

Kuyt never really looked like scoring but with Alonso, Yossi Benayoun and Steven Gerrard all on target, Benitez maintains he is not bothered who scores Liverpool's goals.

"You like to see the strikers scoring goals but if the midfielders are scoring goals then I'm pleased and it doesn't matter to me."

Morten Gamst Pedersen had a long-range strike pushed on to the bar by Pepe Reina in the opening period as Blackburn put on a defiant display.

But Alonso gave Liverpool the lead after Kuyt mis-hit a shot from Gerrard's cross and, 10 minutes afterwards, Benayoun skipped past Stephen Warnock and beat

Rovers goalkeeper Paul Robinson to double the lead.

Roque Santa Cruz halved the deficit with a header but five minutes remaining but Gerrard made the game safe by clipping the ball into an empty net in added time.

Second-from-bottom Blackburn have now gone 10 games without a win in the Premier League but under-pressure manager Paul Ince is confident his side will pull away from trouble.

They now face a vital period of matches against Wigan, Stoke, Sunderland, Manchester City and Fulham and Ince believes that repeats of the performance against Liverpool will be enough to pull them to safety.

"We've got to believe that we can get up into mid-table but it's just getting that win," said the former Reds and England midfielder.

"It was going to be hard against Liverpool because they're going for the Premiership but we matched them for 70 minutes."

"We've got five cup finals coming up and if we play like that we've got to believe that it will turn around."

"I was very encouraged. It's been a bit of a low over the last five or six games and it's been hard for everyone at the club but we put in an exceptional performance against Liverpool."

## 'Messi will do fine in 2010'

INTERNET, undated

Argentina coach Diego Maradona expects Lionel Messi to emulate his World Cup winning display of 1986 in the 2010 tournament in South Africa.

Messi has been widely regarded as one of the best players in the world in recent years and Maradona, who was installed as national team coach last month, believes the Barcelona star will become even better and could lead Argentina to glory.

"Messi still has a long way to go - I think he has another 10 years in front of him to improve," Maradona said.

"He'll be doing fine in 2010, he'll be somewhat like me."

Maradona, whose first game in charge was a 1-0 defeat of Scotland on November 19, reiterated his delight at taking charge of the national team and stressed his desire to succeed.

"I don't feel any tension because they are a great team," he added. "The boys work very hard and take the responsibility to be successful on the big stage."

## Anderton bows out happily

AFP, London

Former England midfielder Darren Anderton marked his final game as a professional footballer by scoring the winning goal in fourth-tier Bournemouth's 1-0 victory over Chester City on Saturday.

Anderton, 36, struck two minutes from time with a 20-yard shot that secured a win at Bournemouth's Dean Court ground against a Chester side who played the last eight minutes down to 10 men after Tony Dinning was sent-off.

Victory gave the Cherries a positive points total 19 games into the season after their League Two campaign was all but wrecked from the outset by a 17-point deduction for a failure to comply with the English Football League's insolvency policy.

Anderton, who made his name along the south coast at Portsmouth, also played for Tottenham, Birmingham and Wolves and won 30 caps for England, appearing in the 1998 World Cup in France, during the course of an 18-year career.

In all, he featured in 568 domestic matches, a fair return for a player nicknamed 'Sicknote' because of his injury-induced absences at Spurs.

Anderton, who is retiring to pursue interests in property development and a solar-powered mobile phone charger, told the Bournemouth Echo before his final match: "It's a tough decision and Saturday will be a sad day."

"I've been lucky to come to Bournemouth and have really enjoyed it. It's been a great way to finish my career."

## Nantes stun Lyon

AFP, Paris



Marseille overcame a resolute Nice on Saturday to claim a precious 2-1 league win, three days ahead of a potentially volatile clash with Champions League opponents Atletico Madrid.

"We deserved the win," said Marseille coach Eric Gerets whose side are now just three points behind champions Lyon who slumped to a shock 2-1 defeat at Nantes courtesy of a controversial late penalty.

"Apart from the first few minutes we dominated the first half. In the second, after (Mahamadou) Niang went off and some players tired it was a bit more difficult."

Winless in their past four matches, Marseille began at an impressive pace and their fluid midfield had Nice chasing shadows for much of the first half.

If they play with as much passion in midweek, Marseille

may get the win against Atletico that would secure them a future in this season's UEFA Cup.

It took a deflection from a Marseille free-kick in the 14th minute for the hosts to claim the opener, Olivier Echouafni turning the ball into his own net.

After dominating the first half the hosts claimed a second goal from the penalty spot.

Nice midfielder Cyril Rool was spotted pulling the shirt of Mathieu Valbuena, and after the referee pointed to the spot Mahamadou Niang stepped up to convert.

Nice emerged from the break fired up and took just three minutes to reduce the arrears, Habib Bamogo slipping past the Marseille defence to fire the ball past Steve Mandanda into the roof of the Marseille net.

The visitors were given reason for hope when Niang left the field injured just after the hour mark. Afterwards Marseille doctors said he could be out for up to six weeks with a foot fracture.

Lyon spurned a chance to further increase their lead at the top after a dramatic 2-1 defeat at Nantes.

Frederic Piquionne fired home for the seven-time champions from a close range rebound after Jerome Alonzo had spilled a Kim Kallstrom free-kick in the 43rd minute.

The Canaries levelled in the 59th minute after Ivan Klasnic, slipped the ball into an empty net after Hugo Lloris pushed the ball into his path following a duel with midfielder Aurelien Capoue.

Klasnic then stepped up to score an 89th minute winner from the penalty spot after a debatable penalty decision following a duel between Nantes' Mamadou Bagayoko and Marseille's Lamine Gassanah.

Rennes are third in the table after a 1-1 draw at Caen which puts them a point behind Marseille.

Struggling Saint Etienne claimed a precious 2-0 win over Le Havre to move further away from the relegation zone.

## Maradona pays homage

Football

AFP, Kolkata

Football legend Diego Maradona Sunday paid homage at Mother Teresa's Missionaries of Charity order in Kolkata at the end of his first visit to India.

About 20,000 fans lined the dusty roads leading to Mother House to catch a glimpse of the Argentine superstar, police said.

Maradona, 48, lit a candle and prayed at Mother Teresa's tomb during a special mass before talking to the sisters and children -- many of them orphans -- who live at the home.

It was set up by Mother Teresa in 1950 and she served the poor and the needy there until

her death in 1997.

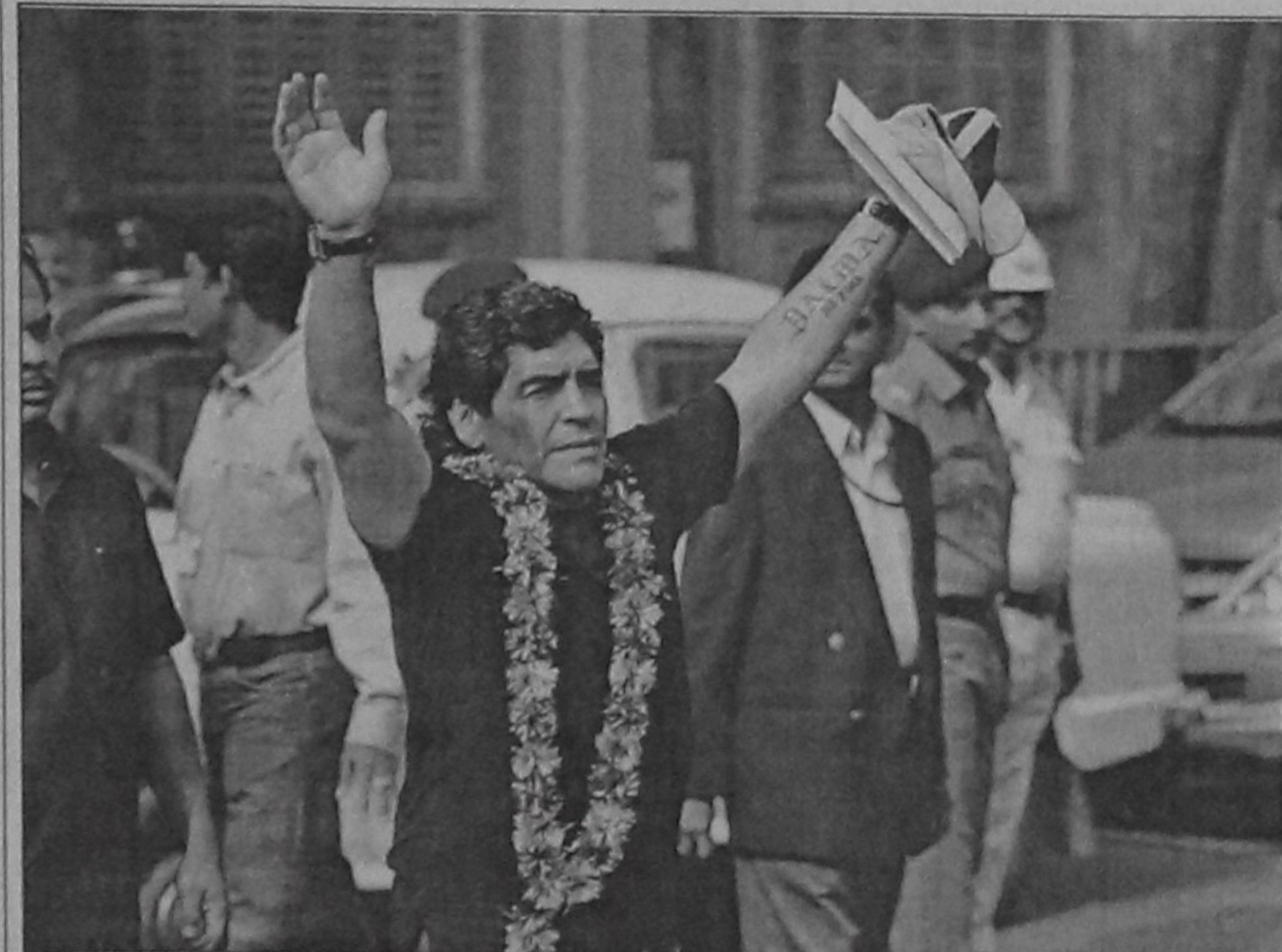
"Maradona talked to the children and kissed their cheeks," Sister Lysa told AFP. "He said it was a great feeling, a dream come true, to come to Mother House and pay tribute to Mother Teresa."

Maradona, recently appointed Argentina's national coach, also visited Mohun Bagan Athletic Club, one of Asia's oldest football clubs, and gave tips to players.

Kolkata is the football centre of India, a country more widely known for its love of cricket.

On Saturday, he spoke about his surprise at the frenzy that marked his visit to the country.

"I did not know that I had so many fans in India and people of the country loved football so much," he said.



Argentina national team coach Diego Maradona acknowledges his fans after visiting the Missionaries of Charity established by the late Mother Teresa in Kolkata on Sunday.



Marseille forward Hatem Ben Arfa skips his way through Nice players during their League One tie at the Velodrome Stadium in Marseille on Saturday.

## Blues dismiss dissent

AFP, Bolton



Chelsea's assistant manager Ray Wilkins dismissed suggestions of dressing room dissent after Luiz Felipe Scolari's side returned to winning ways at Bolton.

Scolari failed to appear for the post-match press conference following the 2-0 victory on Saturday, just hours after reports emerged that senior players at Stamford Bridge were unhappy with the Brazilian's training methods.

According to the newspaper reports, England internationals John Terry and Frank Lampard had voiced their concerns that Scolari's sessions were not intense enough and had become too predictable.

Yet Wilkins laughed off rumours of unrest after goals by Nicolas Anelka and Deco earned Chelsea a first win in four outings at Bolton on Saturday.

Asked directly if there was any unrest, Wilkins said: "None whatsoever. If you're looking at that angle, that team might have fallen apart. You can't perform like that if there is dissent about."

anything more intense.

"They have been well up for every game they have played. Unfortunately in football, sometimes you get beat."

"Over the last couple of years it has been quite rare for Chelsea to lose. It hurts deeply when the lads are beaten, but there's certainly no dissent within the camp."

Commenting on Scolari's decision not to face the press after the game, Wilkins added: "He sometimes gets a little bit tired."

"It's not easy to do a press conference in your own language let alone in a foreign language. He's applied himself absolutely terrific since he has been here and has been a breath of fresh air."

Chelsea remain one point behind Premier League leaders Liverpool after an 11th straight away win, an incredible run stretching back to last March.

Anelka, on his return to Bolton, who sold him for 15 million pounds in January, put his side ahead before Deco's sublime finish before half-time.

Wilkins added: "It was a fantastic performance. It's always an extremely difficult game coming here, but I thought the spirit and the commitment we showed was absolutely first class."

"That's eight straight league wins away from home this season which is an absolutely superb away record."